

## Book Review: Reading Emily Dickinson's She Ate and Drank the Precious Words

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READING EMILY DICKINSON'S *SHE ATE AND DRANK THE PRECIOUS WORDS*

Ana Mañeru Méndez

*Emily Dickinson (1830–1886): She Ate and Drank the Precious Words*

Madrid: Ediciones del Orto, 2003, 96 pp., ISBN 84-7923-264-1

Ana Mañeru, poet, thinker, teacher, actively and lovingly involved in the thinking of sexual difference, offers us a succinct biography and a carefully chosen poetic anthology of Emily Dickinson. Setting out from herself, Ana Mañeru goes through the life and work of Emily Dickinson, who she situates within a feminine symbolic order and as forming part of a genealogy of women who create world. The words of these women and the authority that Ana Mañeru attributes to them is what helps her to confer meaning onto the texts of Emily Dickinson. Together with that is her conviction of the expressability of knowledge itself and the attribution of sense to her own experience of reading.

The work is divided into four parts. First there is 'Chronology', with a first section on the 'Life and Work of Emily Dickinson', where, apart from family events, the most significant events that were to happen to her work are referred to. An eloquent example of Ana Mañeru's position is that the deaths of Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot are included in this section, giving both authors a value of artistic and personal relationship with Emily Dickinson, that is, of genealogy – in spite of the fact that they never knew one another – that would have been lost if they had been included in the second part of the chapter, 'Other Social and Cultural Political Events', where we are given the historical coordinates within which to place the North American poetess.

The second part, 'Emily Dickinson: My Approach Towards Her Life and Work', is divided into six epigraphs: 'Introduction'; 'On Her Life'; 'On Her Work'; 'On Her Freedom'; 'On Her Way of Writing'; and 'On the Attentive Listening to Her Words'. These consist of notes on the life and work of Emily Dickinson, narrated with a rhythm that is loving, sure and gentle. One of the themes that they are based on is the intimate relationship that she had from her youth with the friend who was to become her sister-in-law, Susan Huntington Gilbert, a source of inspiration, support, confidante, teacher, sister, and to whom Emily Dickinson would look for confirmation and measure. The second theme which Ana Mañeru uses to weave the biographical and artistic plot of Emily Dickinson is the profound sense of freedom that characterized it: in her thinking, in her judging, in her doing, in her creating . . .

Chapter III is made up of a selection of texts/poems, translated by Ana Mañeru Méndez herself. Two facts stand out especially in these beautiful versions. In the first place, all the chosen poems reinforce and illustrate the arguments of the biographer in the first pages of the work. Second, Ana Mañeru does not hesitate to attribute a sexed voice to the American poetess, and gives a clear feminine identification to the English neutral pronouns and adjectives ('if one shall find again' from poem 22, 'Be sure you count' from 26, or 'One might depart at option', from 54). It is a translation that is decided in putting before it a symbolic order, the maternal one.

The final chapter, 'Consulted Biography', is devoted to the sources from which Ana Mañeru has nourished herself, and which she has opted to divide into two parts, 'On Editions of Poems and Letters of Emily Dickinson'; and 'On the Life and Work of Emily Dickinson and on Feminine Writing'. It must be pointed out, however, that the recognition of the role played by other women in her approximation to Emily Dickinson is not limited to this final chapter. From the first page,

Ana Mañeru manifests her profound debt to a series of feminine mediations that make up a long genealogical chain of women who have created world. It is they who have permitted her to illuminate and come close to Emily 'without enclosing her in categories or establishing comparisons' that might distract attention from the American poetess's own words.

The main achievement of this book is exactly that which the author has set out to achieve: to help us not to miss the 'greatness amongst the multitude of conventional, banal and distorted interpretations' of the life and work of Emily Dickinson. In this sense, Ana Mañeru Méndez has clearly chosen to distance herself from academic approaches that insist upon a 'thematic' ordering of her work, or psychological interpretations of it that only repeat the same (dis)organization of the world. Neither does she stop to argue with – or share – the version of a violently repressed soul that is manifested in the chinks in her poetry, as Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar have managed to canonize in North American feminist studies. Tiptoeing past useless sterile polemics, she prefers to introduce us to *her* poetess and her words. Without any fuss, in her own particular sweet and clear style, with that writing of hers that is so beautiful, Ana Mañeru offers us a panorama of those interpretations of Dickinson's life, sometimes condescending, almost always erroneous, that Adrienne Rich was to denounce. Meanwhile, she introduces us into Dickinson's home, her family, the room where she wrote and in which, in the words of Dickinson herself, 'freedom is', in the books that she read and loved, in her sense of irony and her peculiar religious feeling, far from the 19th-century puritanism to which she has frequently been linked. At the same time, she introduces us to the poetess's relationship with her work, the family quarrels over her legacy and the successive editions of her poetry and correspondence, her reflective mind, her incredibly personal sense of what is correct, her experience as a measure of the real, the adventure of her unique style and her entirely free usage of the resources of language and poetry.

The style of Ana Mañeru becomes one of the essential elements of this book. Its beauty, its sweetness and clarity, its firm and paused rhythm, speak to us from other worlds of meaning; they are echoes of a voice that we recognize as her own. Because the author does not project her voice and disguise herself as a critic or biographer, but rather reads the words of Emily Dickinson from herself. In this sense, and above all, this book is an emotive testimony, manifested in its careful selection and its fine translation, of a woman poet who is concerned, not to rescue texts from oblivion, but to recover a voice that has been distorted by a tradition of male reading.

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(Translated by Caroline Wilson)

## SHAPING WOMEN'S IDENTITY IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Alice McIntyre  
*Women in Belfast: How Violence Shapes Identity*  
Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004, ix + 207 pp., ISBN 0-275-97925-3

Alice McIntyre became interested in exploring the issues of 'race, ethnicity and discrimination' (p. 4) in Boston with African American youths within the